

ART. IV.—*The Wandarral of the Richmond and  
Clarence River Tribes.*

By R. H. MATHEWS,

Licensed Surveyor.

[Read 13th May, 1897.]

As no description of the initiation ceremonies of the aboriginal tribes who occupy the country watered by the Richmond and Clarence Rivers, on the north-east coast of New South Wales, has hitherto been attempted, I have prepared the following brief account of the *Wandarral* practised by these people, in which it is hoped the principal parts of the ceremony are detailed with sufficient fulness to enable a comparison to be made between this and other rites of the same character in different parts of the Australian continent. The principal languages spoken by the tribes herein dealt with are the Kahwall and Bunjellung, but there are a few others of less importance.

When it has been determined to call the people together for the purpose of inaugurating the youths of the tribes into the privileges and duties of manhood, messengers are despatched to the different sections of the community, informing them of the time and place of the intended gathering. The head man of the tribe, whose turn it is to muster the people, is generally agreed upon at the last *Wandarral* which was held. That is to say, at the conclusion of the *Wandarral* ceremonies, before all the tribes disperse, their head men assemble in council and arrange amongst themselves which tribe shall take the initiative at the next gathering. It is the duty of this tribe, when the appointed time arrives, to prepare the *Wandarral* ground in some part of their own territory, and get everything ready prior to the arrival of the several contingents whom they may invite to attend the ceremony.

A suitable camping ground, capable of accommodating all the tribes who are expected to be present, is selected near some river,

creek, or lagoon of water in a part of the tribe's domain in which there is sufficient game to furnish food for all the people during the continuance of the ceremonies. In the vicinity of this main camp a circular or slightly oval space, known as the *Wandarral*, about thirty yards in diameter, is cleared of all timber and grass, and the soil scraped off the surface in making it level is used to form a mound, or embankment, about nine or twelve inches high around it. The base of the embankment is about eighteen inches wide and tapers upwards to a narrow ridge upon the top. A narrow path, made by scraping the surface of the ground smooth, and throwing the loose earth on either side, leads from this circle to another similarly cleared space, called the *Kangaragal*, which is also bounded by a raised earthen wall, about fifteen or twenty chains distant, in a secluded place out of sight of the *wandarral*. Where the path meets each of the circles an opening about two feet wide is left in the embankment as an entrance to these enclosures. A short distance from the *kangaragal* a fire is kept burning, around which some of the old men camp for the purpose of keeping guard over the sacred ground.

Within the *kangaragal* are two stumps, called the *warran-gooringa*, prepared in the following way. Two straight saplings are dug out of the ground by the roots, and their stems or boles cut through about six or seven feet from the base, all the bark being stripped from the stems and roots. The stems are then reversed end for end and are inserted in holes dug into the ground for the purpose to the depth of a foot or more, and the earth rammed in tightly around them to make them stand firm. The roots attached to these stems, being now at the top, spread out laterally to a distance of two or three feet, and some of them even more, and have narrow strips of bark twisted around them to make them ornamental. The stems and roots of these stumps are then stained with human blood, obtained by making small incisions in the arms of several of the men and allowing the blood to drip into bark vessels until a sufficient quantity for the purpose has been collected, after which the wounds in the men's arms are stopped by the application of cobwebs or opossum fur.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare with my description of similar stumps, called *warrengahlee*, used by the Kamilaroi tribes. Journ. Anthrop. Inst. London, xxv., 325; Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria, ix. (N.S.), 143.

The *warrangooringa* are ten or fifteen feet apart, one being on the right, and one on the left of the spectator as he approaches the ring. There are also two heaps of earth, called *kallagallarranga* within the *kangaragal*, one of which is only a little way from the entrance, and the other near the opposite or back wall. If the track were continued through the ring it would pass over both these heaps, which are about eighteen inches or two feet high. The *warrangooringa* and the *kallagallarranga* form a quadrilateral within the *kangaragal* ring.

While the preparation of the *wandarral* ground is in progress, the head man sends out messengers, whom he selects from among his own people, a messenger being sent to each tribe which is required to be present. Each messenger carries a bullroarer, (*dhooanbooka*), and a number of kilts or "tails," and other articles comprising the simple dress of an Australian savage. He wears a painted head-band around his hair, in which are inserted small bunches of long green grass. Two are generally sent together, one of them being charged with the message, and carrying the sacred emblems, whilst the other man merely keeps him company. When a messenger arrives near the camp to which he has been sent, he waits till the men have returned from their day's hunting, and then approaches the single men's quarters, close to which he and his companion sit down. Some of the men then go to the messengers and bring them into the camp. The head men of the tribe are then brought together on the outskirts of the camp, and the messenger tells them where he has come from, at the same time producing the bullroarer and other emblems of authority, which are handed round and inspected by all the old men present. The messenger remains with this tribe until the time arrives to start for the appointed meeting place. All the men, women and children are then mustered up, and the journey commenced towards the *wandarral* ground—dances and songs being indulged in at the various camping places along the route.

On nearing the general encampment, which is usually in the afternoon, a halt is made somewhere near water, and all the people ornament their bodies with stripes and daubs of coloured clays, in accordance with the style customary in their tribe. The messenger then goes on ahead to the *kangaragal*, where he finds

some of the old men belonging to the local mob, who are always in attendance there. On the arrival of the messenger, these old men give a shout, on hearing which the men at the main camp know that a new mob is approaching. When the messenger starts on to the *kangaragal* all the strange men and women start direct for the *wandarral*, and when the shouting is heard at the *kangaragal*, the new contingent make their appearance in sight of the main camp. The local mob now accord them the customary reception<sup>1</sup> at the *wandarral* ring, after which the strangers proceed to pitch their quarters on the side of the general camping ground nearest their own country.

Several days, and in some cases weeks, may intervene between the arrival of the various tribes who are summoned to be present, and in order to occupy and amuse the people during this time, corroborees are held every fine night by the light of the camp fires, each tribe present taking their turn to provide the evening's amusement. Every afternoon, when the men come into the camp from their hunting expeditions and have a rest, they go away to the *kangaragal*, where they dance and perform feats of jugglery, and sometimes hold important discussions respecting matters of tribal concern. When these meetings are over they return to the *wandarral*, where the head men call out the names of water-holes, shady trees, and other remarkable places in their respective districts, after which they walk away to their own camps.

When all the tribes who are expected to attend the *wandarral* have arrived at the main camp the head men assemble at the *moodyang*, or private meeting place, and after a consultation among themselves they fix the day on which the novices will be taken away for the purpose of initiation. When the appointed time arrives, the boys are mustered out of the entire camp and taken close to the *wandarral* ring early in the morning. The brother-in-law, or guardian, of each novice now takes charge of him, and paints him<sup>2</sup> with stripes of pipe-clay on the chest and arms, and puts feathers in his hair, after which he invests him with a belt, four tails or kilts, a head-band, and armlets. The boys are then placed sitting down on the outside of the ring, on the side

---

<sup>1</sup> Journ. Anthrop. Inst., xxv., 321-325.

<sup>2</sup> Generally the mother and sisters of the boy paint him, and the brother-in-law invests him with a man's dress.

nearest the camp, their guardians remaining beside them. The mothers and relatives of the novices are also present.

After these preliminary performances, the novices are taken away from their mothers in the following manner:—The men and the boys' mothers enter the ring and dance round, after which they come out and go to where the boys are sitting. The latter are then helped to their feet by their guardians, and are taken into the ring and placed standing near one side of the embankment bounding it. Some old men now dance and jump about in the ring, passing from one side to the other for some time, making guttral noises, or singing, as they do so. An old man then advances to one of the novices and places a spear in each of his hands. These spears belong to the boy's guardians, or to some of his friends, and when the boy has held them a short time, the owner steps forward and takes them from the boy and carries them out of the ring, where he lays them on the ground, or leans them against an adjacent tree. Another old man goes through the same routine with another novice, and so on till they have all been disposed of in the same manner. The same old men then approach their respective novices, one after another in the same order as before, and insert one or more boomerangs in the belt of each boy. While these and similar other proceedings are going on, the men and women around the circle are singing and jumping about, going through various pieces of buffoonery.

The guardians now take charge of the novices, bending their heads on their breasts, and, catching them by the arm, lead them away along the track to the *kangaragal*. The men and women who are standing at the *wandarral*, then pick up sticks from the fires, which are burning close by, and throw them into the centre of the ring, and then follow after the novices and their guardians. The mothers and other female relatives go only about fifty yards after the men and then turn back to their own camp. The novices are conducted to the *kangaragal* ring, where they are placed standing near the opening in the embankment, their heads being still bowed upon their breasts. An old head man is sitting on each of the *warrangooringa*,<sup>1</sup> performing magical feats, such as

---

<sup>1</sup> Journ. Anthropol. Inst., xxv., 324

bringing up through his mouth quartz crystals (goorowee) or pieces of string.

The guardians now catch hold of the boys' heads and straighten them up, telling them at the same time to raise their eyes and take particular notice of the old men. After they have looked at these performances for a while some of the chief men who are standing close by catch hold of the stumps (*warrangooringa*) on which the old men are sitting, and shake them slightly from side to side. While these performances are going on the other men dance round outside the ring, and in a short time the old men descend from the stumps and dance round the heaps of earth, *Kallagallarranga*, before described, followed by a number of the other old men present.

Then one of the guardians leads a novice into the *kangaragal*, and jumps about with him amongst the old men, after which he takes the boy to the other side of the ring, where he remains standing with him. Then another guardian takes another novice and goes through the same performances until all the boys have been dealt with, after which the guardians and novices go out of the ring by stepping over the embankment on the side opposite to that which they entered, where they remain standing as spectators. The old men then pull one of the *warrangooringa* out of the ground and hold it in a horizontal position, and dance round a few times carrying the stump in their hands, after which they lay it down in the middle of the ring. The other stump is now pulled up and a similar performance gone through, after which it is placed on the ground beside the first one. A sufficient quantity of wood, which had previously been collected for the purpose, is then laid down upon these *warrangooringa*, to which a fire is applied, and some of the men remain in the vicinity till they are completely consumed.

The guardians, with their novices accompanied by the rest of the men, then start away and proceed several miles into the bush. The novices have to walk along with their eyes cast down, and are not allowed to look at anything except the ground just in front of them, their guardians being beside them. At some convenient place by the way a stoppage is made, and the boys are put standing in a row with their heads bowed as usual. The

men then pass along in front of them, imitating some animal, such as pelicans, kangaroos, or the like, and the novices are permitted to raise their heads and look at them. During the remainder of the day the men engage in hunting, for the purpose of providing food for themselves, as well for the boys and their guardians. On arriving at the camping place a yard is made for the boys, in which they are placed lying down upon leaves which are strewn thickly upon the ground and rugs are thrown over them. This yard is semi-circular in shape, and is built of forks and saplings with bushes laid up against them, the convex end of the partial enclosure being towards the men's camp, which is perhaps fifty yards distant. Across the open end of the yard a few fires are lit to afford warmth to the novices and their guardians when they are occupying it.<sup>1</sup>

When the game which has been caught during the day is cooked by the men at their own quarters, a fair share is taken by the guardians and given to the novices, who are then permitted to sit up, with their backs towards the men's camp, and must eat their food with the blankets or rugs over their heads, so that they cannot see anything around them. None of the men eat any of the game at their own camp until the novices have been supplied with their allowance.

Close to the men's camp, between it and the yard in which the boys are kept, a space is cleared of all grass and loose rubbish, with a fire lit on one side of it. About dusk the novices are brought out and placed sitting in a row on the ground near this cleared patch, facing the fire on the other side of which the men are to perform. Presently the men dance along past the fire imitating the gait and actions of one or more of the following animals:—bandicoots, grasshoppers, wallabies, turkeys, iguanas, native-bears, or any other creature which may have been selected as the subject of the play for the evening. After this the men sing for a while as they sit around the camp fire, and then all hands go to sleep for the night.

The following morning the men start out in search of game, esculent roots, and native bees' nests. The guardians remain at the camp with the boys, and when the men return from their

---

<sup>1</sup> Journ. Anthropol. Inst., xxiv., 422.

hunting the programme of the evening's performances is arranged, and is carried out by the men in the same manner as on the previous night. Different animals are represented each evening, and the singing is varied as much as their scanty repertoire of songs will admit of, the members of each tribe contributing a fair share. It often happens that a fresh camping place is reached each night, and in that case it would be necessary for the novices and guardians to accompany the rest of the men when they start out in the morning. The novices march along with their heads bowed as usual, and when stoppages are made in the bush, they are put sitting on the ground, and are told not to gaze around them. On arriving at the place which has been selected as the camping ground for the night, a bough yard is made for the boys as before ; or if the weather is warm, the yard may be dispensed with. During the evenings at these camping places in the bush human excrement is occasionally given in small quantities to the novices, and they are also compelled to drink some of the urine of the men, collected in a bark vessel for this purpose.<sup>1</sup>

I must now take the reader back to the morning on which the boys were taken away from their mothers at the *wandarral* ring in the manner already described. Shortly after the novices and their guardians have gone out of sight the women pack up all their baggage and start away to another site, which has been fixed upon by the old men, where they erect a new camp, the members of each tribe keeping by themselves on the side facing the district from which they have come—the camp of the local mob forming the initial point. Several old men remain with the women to assist them in removing the camp, and also to watch that everything is conducted in conformity with tribal custom. At this camp the mothers of the novices sing every morning and evening during the time their sons are away in the bush with the head men. When they have been here about a week, another tribe of men and women arrive, and after the usual formalities of reception have been gone through they proceed to erect their quarters on the side of the new camp which is in the direction

---

<sup>1</sup> See my paper on "The Keeparra Ceremony of Initiation." *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xxvi., No. 99, May, 1897.



of their own country. This is the first appearance of this tribe at the ceremonial gathering, and the purpose of their visit is to engage in a sham fight with the other tribes who are initiating the boys, particulars of which will be given presently. They have come from a distant part of the community's territory so that the boys will not know them, and therefore make the encounter appear all the more real.

The description of the ceremonies in the bush will now be resumed from the point where the above digression was made. When the several pantomimic representations and songs referred to in the preceding pages have been continued for about ten days, one of the men goes from the bush mob to the new camp erected by the women and informs the men there that the course of performances in the bush has been duly carried out. This man does not go openly into the camp but approaches it about dusk, and when he gets within a short distance of the men's quarters, but sufficiently far to be out of sight, he sounds a small bullroarer, called *dhalguñgun*, which he carries for the purpose.<sup>1</sup> When the head men hear this noise they know that some one from the bush camp wishes to communicate with them, and one or more of them go in the direction from which the sound has been heard, and on finding the messenger they enter into conversation with him. He tells them everything which has been done in the bush, and if they are satisfied that the curriculum has been complied with and the novices kept away long enough, they arrange for a meeting place in some well known locality, perhaps a couple of miles from the women's camp, where the mob who have charge of the boys can be found the next day or the day following. The messenger then goes away back to his own mob in the bush and tells them the meeting place which has been decided upon.

On the day which has been thus appointed several old men start away from the women's camp towards the place where they expect to meet the bush mob. On getting about half-way there they form

---

<sup>1</sup> The *dhalguñgun* is a small bullroarer used by the Clarence and Richmond River blacks. It is suspended on a short string, which is attached to a pliable rod which serves as a handle, and is used in the same way as the *moonibear* amongst the Wiradthuri tribes. — "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes," Journ. Anthropol. Inst., xxv., 298, pl. xxvi. fig. 39.

a temporary camping place, where they stop for the present, with the exception of two who go on. When these two men get within hearing distance, they tap two nulla nullas, or other weapons together, and crouch down in the long grass, or among bushes, so as to be out of sight. The bush mob hear the tapping, but pretend they don't know what it is, and say to each other in the presence of the boys, "What noise is that?" The beating of the nulla nullas is again heard, and after this has been repeated several times, the two old men stand up in a place where they are within view of the bush mob and walk towards them. The men and novices now advance towards the two old men, and on getting close to them they leave the boys standing with their guardians, and all the rest of the men run on round the two old fellows, singing and clapping their hands as they jump about. The novices are allowed to see this performance, and at its conclusion the men return to them, and the whole of them go back to where they had just previously come from. The two old men then start away to the place where they left their comrades. The bush mob, including the novices, then paint themselves with coloured clays, and dress in their full regalia. Two more of the old men, before referred to, who are also painted and wearing their toga, are then heard approaching, giving a long-drawn whistle at intervals. When the bush mob hear the whistle, they all lie down in a scrubby place, or in the long grass, to make the novices believe they are hiding. The two old men walk round them a short distance off, but pretend they cannot find them, after which they retire. In a little while two other old men are heard whistling, and the bush mob answer them. Presently they appear in sight, each man carrying in his right hand a boomerang, which he sways from side to side and utters guttural noises. This time they find the men and boys, who are apparently hidden, who get up and jump and swing their arms about. The two old men then turn and run away, and the bush mob follow them, shouting and hitting their weapons together.<sup>1</sup> The two old men keep retreating till they get close to the main camp, when they turn round and face their pursuers. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare this with my account of the impressive performance of the *beejay* in "The Bora of the Kamilaroi Tribes." Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria, ix. (N.S.), 167-171.

strange mob of men who arrived at the main camp a few days before, as stated in a previous page, now come to the assistance of the two men, and boomerangs and spears are thrown on both sides, the novices also joining in what is apparently a real fight. When the affray is over the novices are taken away to a camp a short distance beyond the men's quarters, and that night they are shown a number of the sacred quartz crystals belonging to the old head men of the tribes present.

The next morning the novices are taken some distance into the bush to a place where a circle about fifty feet in diameter has been formed on the ground, similar to the wandarral, but of smaller dimensions. This ring is called *Mahghiñ*, and the trees growing around it are marked with tomahawks in different patterns. The turf is also marked with various wavy and zigzag lines cut into the surface of the ground with sharp pieces of wood used as spades. These grooves in the soil have narrow pieces of bark layed in them to make them all the more conspicuous and ornamental. All the drawings on the trees, and on the surface of the soil are called *moombeery*. The novices are first shown the carvings on the ground, being led by their guardians to each figure with their heads bowed, and are then told to take particular notice of the drawing before them. When they have seen all these, they are next shown all the marked trees, one after another, in the same way. The boys are next placed standing in a row, with their eyes cast upon the ground, near the *mahghiñ*, and the men form into a semicircle in front of them. Two men then step into the open space between the line of men and the novices, and commence swinging bull-roarers (*dhooanbooka*) and the boys are directed to look at them. The head men then step up quite close to the novices, with uplifted spears in their hands, in a menacing attitude, and caution them against revealing anything they have seen in the bush to women or the uninitiated on pain of death.

The men and neophytes are now painted and dressed in their full regalia, and then all hands start for the camp where the mothers of the novices, and the other women and children are located, a messenger having been sent some time before to let them know the boys are returning.<sup>1</sup> The mothers of the latter,

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Bunan Ceremony of New South Wales." *American Anthropologist*, ix., 340.

and the elder women of the tribe, accompanied by some old men then proceed a few chains from the camp, where they clear a space of all sticks and rubbish which may be lying upon it. Here they light two fires several yards apart, and cut a lot of green bushes which they stack in heaps close by. The women are painted and attired in their tribal dress, standing near the fires, on the side opposite to that from which the contingent is expected to approach. When all is ready, the bush mob appear in sight, marching in single file, a head man walking at each side—one near the front and another near the rear. When they arrive close to the fires, the women throw pieces of bark over the heads of the boys as they approach. Each mother then catches hold of her son, and conducts him to one of the fires, on which some green bushes are now thrown. The mothers, assisted by the guardians, place the novices standing on the boughs, from which a dense column of smoke ascends around them. The men sing, and the old women present wave their arms about while the boys are being smoked. When the two old men who came marching in with the bush contingent consider that the boys have been sufficiently fumigated, they clap their hands together, and the boys then run away with their guardians to a camp, which has been provided for them a short distance off. All the other men are then smoked in a similar way, fresh boughs being laid upon the fires when more smoke is required, and, at the conclusion of the ceremony, the men and women go into the main camp.

In a few days after the smoke ordeal just described, the strange tribes who have attended the ceremonies make preparations for their departure. Before the assemblage breaks up the head men of each tribe consult together and select the tribe which will have to prepare the next wandarral ground and entertain the people who will assemble there. Each tribe now take charge of their own neophytes, and take them away with them. On their arrival in their own country the boys are still kept under restraint, and are not permitted to mix with the women or children. They must also abstain from eating certain kinds of food, enumerated by the head men, until they are released from these restrictions. When they have completed their term of probation, they are again mustered at a place near the women's camp, and are smoked

in the same manner as before. Near this place a net is spread upon the ground and food provided by the mothers is spread upon it.<sup>1</sup> The neophytes are brought up and partake of the food, after which they are taken into a camp near that of the single men. After a time, which may be of some months' duration, the boys are brought nearer and nearer the men's quarters until they are eventually allowed to camp amongst the other young men of the tribe.

It is necessary that each neophyte must participate in one or more subsequent wandarral gatherings before he is fully qualified to take his place as a man of the tribe.<sup>2</sup> The reason of this is evident when it is remembered that, at the first wandarral which a novice attends, he is prevented from seeing the whole of the ceremonial, in consequence of having to keep his eyes cast down during some of the most important parts of it. In many cases a boy is not more than twelve or fourteen years of age when he is first initiated, which is an additional ground for delay in admitting him to the full status of manhood.

The native tribes scattered over the Clarence and Richmond Rivers do not at the present time extract a front incisor tooth of the novice at their initiation ceremonies, and very old black-fellows have told me in answer to my special enquiries on this point that this custom was never practised amongst them.

In this article I have dealt only with the most important portions of the wandarral, and my descriptions of even those are much abridged, in order to keep the paper within reasonable limits. As this is the first account of the wandarral which has ever been published, it is not improbable, in consequence of the numerous particulars to be taken down at each stage of the ceremonies, that some omissions have been made, but it is hoped they will be found unimportant. From a mass of detail now in my note books, the result of many years' acquaintance with these blacks, I am preparing a comprehensive supplementary article on this subject, which will be communicated on a future occasion.

The present paper completes a series of articles communicated by me to different learned societies in Australia, Europe and

---

<sup>1</sup> Proc. Roy. Soc. Victoria, ix. (N.S.), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Journ. Anthrop. Inst., xxvi., 284, *note* 1.

America, in which I have described the initiation ceremonies of various tribes covering about three-quarters of the total area of the colony of New South Wales. This immense tract of country is comprised approximately within the following geographical limits. Commencing at Point Danger it follows along the boundary between New South Wales and Queensland as far as Warrego River, thence it is bounded by an indirect line to the junction of the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, thence up the last-named river and onwards along the Victorian boundary to Cape Howe, and thence by the Pacific Ocean to Point Danger. My researches have also been carried a considerable distance into Queensland, as well as into the Victorian frontier; particulars of the areas within which I have worked will be stated at another time.

---